

Floods threaten Mexico and Central America with famine

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Two weeks of torrential rains threaten the food supplies of Mexico, Central America and Colombia.

Rains falling over Mexico, all of Central America and Colombia are causing widespread flooding, disrupting the lives of more than 700,000 people and threatening food stocks. Food prices are on the rise, and thousands are threatened with famine.

As much rain has fallen in this vast region in the last two or three weeks as normally falls during a year. The rains are coming from tropical depression E-12 sitting over the Pacific Ocean.

The deaths of 40 people in Mexico, 120 in Central America and 35 in Colombia are being attributed to the flooding. The damage to food crops is just beginning to be assessed and the death toll is climbing.

In the Mexican state of Tabasco alone, over 250,000 people have been displaced by the floods and are demanding government aid. Ten rivers have flooded, including the Usumacinta River, Mexico's largest, which runs from Guatemala, Chiapas and Tabasco to the Gulf of Mexico. At one point last week, the Usumacinta had crested more than 2 meters above flood stage, affecting 11,000 people in Chiapas, in addition to the Tabasco victims.

Over 27,000 farms covering 279,000 hectares of land are under water in this small southeastern state. By the latest count, 976 cities and towns are flooded, including Tabasco's second largest city, Cardenas, with a population of 250,000.

Some 217,000 hectares of pastureland are under water; 144,000 head of cattle had to be evacuated, together with some 1,500 barnyard birds. The most affected crops will be corn, sorghum, chili peppers, bananas, and melons.

Relative to the needs of the Tabasco population, aid is far from adequate. Mexico's Department of National Defense (SEDESOL), charged with the relief effort, has distributed 19,708 meals, 14,206 liters of water, 5,750 tarps, 6,330 mats and 1,825 personal sanitation kits, less than one-tenth of what is required daily. Given that this climatic event was entirely predictable, the slow response signals a general atmosphere of indifference and criminality.

On October 22, the government of President Felipe Calderon sent two tons of medical supplies and 26 doctors, dentists, nurses and sanitation experts—a pittance.

The laxity of the relief effort has developed in the context of a political dispute between the state and federal governments. Tabasco Governor Andres Granier accused the Calderon administration of politicizing the relief, bypassing state agencies.

Granier, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party that rules Tabasco, charged that Calderon is illegally using the federal aid as political patronage, channeling it through officials of Mexico's ruling party, the PAN, with eyes on the 2012 elections.

For Mexico, a nation already weakened by corruption and civil war, this has been a year of environmental disasters that foreshadow a massive food crisis. Drought, freezing temperatures, and floods have contributed to the loss of some 400,000 heads of cattle. This will significantly reduce national food stocks this year when coupled with severe losses in the production of corn, beans and sorghum.

In the north, freezing temperatures and drought, followed by torrential rains, have all but wiped out agricultural production in the state of Chihuahua. Other states affected are Sinaloa, Tlaxcala, Zacatecas, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Durango and Tamaulipas. The price of tortillas, a staple in the Mexican diet, is expected to be 30 percent higher at the end of this year relative to 2010. The expectation for the rise in the price of corn is higher, 56 percent in comparison with last year. The price of beans is already 70 percent higher, and that of vegetable shortening 100 percent, sugar 40 percent, milk 50 percent, rice 130 percent, and bread 60 percent.

Average wages for Mexican workers remain at roughly 2000 pesos a week, but in terms of purchasing power, they are now the lowest in Latin America, according to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*. A University of Mexico (UNAM) study determined that a worker now earning 57.46 pesos a day would have to extend the working day to 22 hours to afford to buy a "preferred" market basket of food for a family of four. The UNAM study concluded that to lead a decent life, a Mexican worker needed to take in roughly 15 times the minimum wage, or 3.5 times the current average.

In the opinion of the head of Mexico's Water Board (CONAGUA), Jose Luis Luege, both drought in the north and the floods in the south are the result of global warming. He pointed out at an October 20 Congressional hearing that Mexico's weather is becoming increasingly volatile and called for investments in flood prevention and water storage.

Global warming is not the only problem. The surface land of Tabasco, a state rich in oil and gas, has been subsiding due to the extraction of these natural resources. The technology to prevent land from sinking exists and is well known, but the necessary investment and measures were never implemented by CONAGUA or anyone else, leaving large parts of the state increasingly

vulnerable to flooding.

This is not the first time that Tabasco has been under water. In October 2007, by some estimates more than 70 percent of the state was under water, and 1 million people lost their homes. At the time, President Calderon called that flood “one of the worst national disasters in the history of the country,” and promised infrastructure projects to prevent a repetition of what in Mexico is known as the “Great Flood of 2007.”

In August of this year, as the rains were beginning to fall, a Congressional Financial Audit pointed out that barely anything had been done, despite an investment by CONAGUA of 77 million pesos (US\$5.6 million).

Tabasco has in fact been suffering all the negative effects of oil and gas production, while the benefits flow out of state to enrich bankers and capitalists in Mexico City, Madrid, Wall Street, and elsewhere.

Floods in the south and drought and freezing weather in the north led the president of the Agriculture Committee of the Mexican Congress, Cruz Lopez Aguilar, to voice his concern that private “catastrophic” insurance companies lack adequate reserves to cover all potential losses. He has called for an extraordinary government fund of 10,000 million pesos to bail out the insurance companies.

Conditions in Central America are no better.

The governments of El Salvador (250,000 affected and 50,000 displaced) and Nicaragua (134,000 affected, 9,000 displaced) have appealed for international aid. Guatemala (155,000 affected) has yet to do so. Last week more than 47 centimeters of rain fell across parts of Central America and 1,500 miles of roads have been damaged by mudslides.

So far, a paltry pledge from the United States—\$75,000 to El Salvador and \$50,000 to Guatemala (smaller than Taiwan’s initial contribution of \$300,000 to Guatemala and \$200,000 to Honduras)—will have virtually no effect.

In Nicaragua, the level of Lake Managua continues to rise, putting the low-lying areas of the Nicaraguan capital in peril. Lake Managua, Central America’s largest lake, divides Western Nicaragua from Costa Rica.

Previous to these floods, the United Nation’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) had recommended that Central America allot 10 percent of its gross domestic product to repair damages caused by previous climate disasters, a recommendation that was largely ignored. This year’s flooding will require that 15 percent, or perhaps 20 percent of GDP be allotted to the repair of infrastructures and homes.

As in Tabasco, the lack of planning and investment is clear evidence of the rapacious imperialist exploitation of the region’s natural and agricultural resources.

In El Salvador, where the amount of rainfall has exceeded that of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, preliminary estimates of crop damage indicate that 40 percent of the corn crop has been destroyed. An association of small farmers reported to National Radio that 75 percent of the bean crop has been wiped out.

In Guatemala, 40,000 peasant farmers have lost all their crops and are now facing famine.

Popular reaction to the floods is a cause of concern for the ruling

elites. In southern Honduras, in the wake of the collapse of a recently constructed bridge, popularly called “the bridge of corruption,” protesters denounced “handouts” by politicians. “We object to being used as material for their campaigns,” said one protester in the city of Amates. “Out with politicians that only promise and never deliver! They arrive with a bag of food, but all they are here for is photo or TV footage.”

One third of the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, is threatened with mudslides. Extensive damage is expected for food crops, particularly in the southern part of the nation.

The Central American damages are a direct consequence of the poverty and extreme levels of social inequality that are endemic to the region. As in Tabasco and Chiapas, resources that should have been used to buttress infrastructure, for rational urban planning and risk and resource management, have instead been funneled into the private coffers of privileged elites and transnational corporations and banks.

A rise in respiratory disease has been noted, and international health experts are concerned that this crisis will lead to a spread in the H1N1 bird-flu virus.

In Colombia, the rains have victimized 100,000. As of last weekend, 35 are reported dead. The northern coastal city of Cartagena was first hit by floodwaters on October 19, when the Turbaco River overflowed its banks. The main highway that links Cartagena and Santa Marta with the port city of Barranquilla has been damaged by the floods and is impassable. Five million people live in these three coastal cities.

This is the second year of exceptionally heavy rains across this region. Last year was worse, but this year’s overall impact, due in part to the fact that soils were still waterlogged from 2010, and in part to the cumulative destruction of bridges, roads and other infrastructure, is more serious.

Even before the effects of these storms on the food supplies of this large geographic region are fully realized, there are signs that famine is already present in some rural areas of Mexico, according to reports from the Torreón Catholic Diocese. Every day hundreds of displaced farmers and their families flock to this city in Coahuila state to ask for food that they can no longer afford to buy. And it is not just food: the cost of potable water is also on the rise, forcing families to turn to sources of drinking water that are contaminated by parasites and pollutants.



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